

A
VINDICATION

OF THE

PRINCIPLES upon which several UNITARIAN
CHRISTIANS have formed themselves into
societies, for the purpose of avowing
and recommending their views of
religious doctrine, by the
distribution of books,
&c. &c.

in order to be able to do so, it is necessary to have a good knowledge of the principles of the doctrine, and to be able to apply them to the facts of the case.

A

VINDICATION

OF THE

PRINCIPLES UPON WHICH SEVERAL UNITARIAN

CHRISTIANS HAVE FORMED THEMSELVES INTO

SOCIETIES, FOR THE PURPOSE OF REVIVING

AND RECOMMENDING THEIR VIEWS OF

RELIGIOUS DOCTRINE, BY THE

DISTRIBUTION OF BOOKS,

&c. &c.

A
VINDICATION
OF
THE PRINCIPLES

UPON WHICH

Several UNITARIAN CHRISTIANS have formed
themselves into Societies, for the purpose
of avowing and recommending their
Views of Religious Doctrine,
by the Distribution of
Books.

IN A LETTER TO — — —.

BY JOHN KENTISH.

Every man who has judgment enough to form a religious opinion,
should have the uprightness to avow and support it.

DYER'S Inquiry into Subscription, &c.

THE SECOND EDITION.

L O N D O N :

PRINTED BY J. DAVIS, CHANCERY-LANE;
AND SOLD BY J. JOHNSON, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH-YARD.

MDCCC.

VINDICATION

OR

THE PRINCIPLES

UPON WHICH

Several Unitarian Christians have founded
themselves into Societies, for the purpose
of avowing and recommending their
Views of Religious Doctrine,
by the Distribution of

IN A LETTER TO
BY JOHN KEESLEY

THE SECOND EDITION

LONDON

PRINTED BY J. BARNES, ST. MARTIN'S LANE
AND SOLD BY J. JOHNSON, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH-YARD
MDCCLXXXIII

P R E F A C E.

A FEW copies of the following Letter were printed at a country press in the year 1794 *; and obtained, agreeably to the design of the writer, and the occasion of the pamphlet, a *local* circulation. But, the members of the Society to which it immediately related, having been pleased to call for a second edition of the piece, from the hope that it will prove more extensively useful, when read as “A Vindication of the Principles upon which Societies of this nature either already exist, or may with propriety be formed;” the author now gives it to the public, with this single view, under a new title, and not without

* Under the title, “A Letter to ————
on the late Correspondence, &c.

variations and additions. *All* the names, and *some* of the allusions, originally introduced, he has at present omitted ; nor, indeed, have any of the latter been retained, excepting where such a preservation was deemed absolutely essential to the accuracy of his statements and the conclusiveness of his reasoning. He has, also, gladly availed himself of this opportunity to correct, in many places, the language of his performance.

Unless he be a total stranger to the feelings of his breast, and the motives of his conduct, he may venture to affirm, that not with the unworthy desire of wantonly inflicting pain, but only from a wish to advance what he most cordially values as the cause of religious truth and virtue, he engaged at first in the undertaking. He still laments, that, whilst he asserted this cause, it became necessary for him to animadvert, in some measure, upon the behaviour of an, otherwise respectable, individual : yet he judged, that
no

no considerations of this kind ought to restrain him from the exercise of *duty*. Concerning that behaviour he is unconscious of having expressed himself in stronger terms than the circumstances demanded. If, however, he have deceived himself in this persuasion; if, contrary to his intention and endeavour, he have written even a single word in reference to it, which the law of Christian love ought to have forbidden with effect; he deplores his want of candour or of judgment; and entreats his readers, that in erasing such word from the pages of his tract, they will blot it out, if possible, at the same time, from “the tablets of their hearts *.”

* Si quid dixerim contra spiritum caritatis evangelicæ, indictum esto.

Dec. 7th, 1799.

no considerations of this kind ought to
 restrain him from the exercise of duty.
 Concerning that behaviour he is uncon-
 scious of having expressed himself in
 stronger terms than the circumstances
 demanded. If, however, he have de-
 ceived himself in this persuasion; if, con-
 trary to his intention and endeavour, he
 have written even a single word in re-
 ference to it, which the law of Christian
 love ought to have forbidden with effect;
 he deplores his want of candour, or of
 judgment; and contrasts his conduct, that
 is, expressing such word from the page of
 his tract, they will blot it out, if possible,
 at the same time, from "the tablets of
 their hearts."

* If God direct, I cannot refrain from saying
 that, in this tract, I have endeavoured to
 present a plain and simple view of the
 Christian religion, as it is contained in the
 Scriptures, and as it is taught in the
 Church of England. I have not intended
 to enter into any controversy with any
 sect or denomination of men, but to
 present a plain and simple view of the
 Christian religion, as it is contained in the
 Scriptures, and as it is taught in the
 Church of England.

A 4

THE

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION.

IT is conceived, that the circumstances which have occasioned the following Letter, will be sufficiently understood by a reference to the correspondence between ——— and ———. This correspondence, therefore, is here reprinted. It has been judged adviseable likewise to annex the Declaration of the Society to which it relates; the nature and object of this Society being there stated, it is presumed, with the greatest explicitness and candour.

CORRESPONDENCE, &c.

No. I.

The Notice delivered at ——— Meeting-house, — on Sunday, June 29, 1794.

“ You are desired to take notice, that Wednesday next, being the day appointed for the Annual Meeting
ing

ing of the Society of Unitarian Christians, established for promoting Christian knowledge, and the practice of virtue, by the distribution of books, a Sermon will be preached on the occasion in this place: the service to begin at eleven o'clock."

No. II.

_____'s first Note.

"____ presents his respectful compliments to the Rev. Mr. _____, and, as one of the trustees for the _____ meeting-house, would beg the favour of Mr. _____'s informing him whether he has had the permission of the trustees for giving the notice relating to the sermon to be preached at that meeting-house next Wednesday.

"Sunday noon, 29th June, 1794."

No. III.

Mr. _____'s first Note.

"_____'s respects wait on Mr. _____. He received the notice, which he read this morning, from Mr. _____, last evening, as what he himself intended to read had he officiated to day."

No. IV.

_____'s second Note.

"Mr. _____ is much obliged to Mr. _____ for his information, and desires, as one of the trustees,
that

that he will give notice to Mr. ——— immediately to contradict the notice given this morning at the ——— meeting-house, this afternoon; Mr. ——— intending to call a meeting of the trustees to-morrow on the subject.

Sunday, 2 o'clock."

No. V.

Mr. ———'s second Note.

" Mr. ——— will not have an opportunity to comply with Mr. ———'s request, as Mr. ——— is at ———."

No. VI.

———'s Letter to Mr. ———.

" Rev. Sir,

" Agreeable to the information which I had the pleasure of giving you yesterday, there has been a meeting of a majority of the trustees of the ——— meeting-house this afternoon, when the several papers which have passed between us relating to the notice of preaching the anniversary sermon of the Unitarian Society, were laid before them; and I am desirous to say, that they are unanimously of opinion that the house should not be opened on the occasion, and have given their directions accordingly.

I am,

Monday afternoon, Your most obedient servant,
June 30, 1794. ———"

No. VII.

Note from the Trustees and others of the
—— Meeting-house.

“ The trustees and others of —— meeting present their respects to the Rev. Mr. ——, and request that himself and his friends will make that use of the —— meeting-house on the morrow, which their ancestors have been accustomed to glory in, viz. worshipping the Great God, according to the dictates of their own consciences.

“ Tuesday, 4 o'clock—July 1, 1794.”

No. VIII.

Extract from the Minutes of the Society
of Unitarian Christians.

“ Resolved, That the thanks of this Society be returned to the trustees and other members of the —— meeting-house, for the very liberal and handsome manner in which they offered them the use of the house for the religious service of this day.”

Preamble to the Rules of the Society.

“ THE Christian Religion, deriving its origin from the immediate revelation of God, and being the scheme which infinite wisdom has chosen as best
calculated

calculated to lead men to virtue and happiness, must be of the greatest value to mankind. But as it operates upon the minds of those who embrace it only by the excellence of its doctrines and institutions, its utility is lessened in proportion as these are corrupted. That christianity has suffered great injury by the additions made to it, since the time of Christ and his Apostles, is readily allowed by all Protestants; and they have exerted themselves with commendable zeal to remove them. To us it is equally evident that many errors are still retained by Protestants themselves, no less pernicious than those which have been abandoned. To endeavour, therefore, to obtain a further reformation of religion, and to restore it to the standard of original purity, must be regarded as a useful and benevolent undertaking, worthy of the zealous exertions of all those who wish to promote the religious improvement and happiness of the human race. It is to accomplish this important purpose, in conjunction with others of the same sentiments with ourselves in other parts of the kingdom, that this Society is formed.

“Considering that one principal obstruction to the progress of just sentiments in religion, has arisen from the want of an open avowal of them by those by whom they have been embraced, or of other methods of making them known to the world, we have thought proper to associate ourselves together, in order to distribute among those who are disposed to

to inquire, such books as appear to us to contain the purest account of the doctrines of revelation, and to be best calculated to promote the interests of true piety and virtue, but more particularly among such persons as from their situation in life are precluded in a great measure from obtaining the means of information; declaring it to be the fundamental principle of the Society, in which we all agree, *that there is but one God, the Creator and Governor of the universe, without an equal or a vicegerent, the only object of religious worship; and that Jesus Christ was the most eminent of those messengers which he has employed to reveal his will to mankind, possessing extraordinary powers similar to those received by other prophets, but in a much higher degree.*

“ While we thus declare our belief in the strict unity of God, and cannot but regard every practice as idolatrous which attributes any of the prerogatives of the Deity to another, a conclusion in which we think ourselves warranted by the language of scripture, we would not be understood to assert, that we think such practices are attended with the same immoral consequences as the idolatry which prevailed in the ancient heathen world. That they are, however, in *all* cases injurious, and in *some* highly criminal, we have no doubt; but how far they may be so in any particular instance we pretend not to determine, as it must depend upon circumstances which can be known only to the individuals concerned, and to that Being who searches their hearts.

“ In laying down the above principles as the fundamental maxims of the Society, we do no more than exercise the authority which every society possesses, of determining the object for which they associate, and to the promoting which they choose to limit their endeavours. No one can justly complain that he is injured or aggrieved thereby. If others should think fit to form societies for propagating such views of the Christian Religion as are different from those we entertain, they have an undoubted right to do so, and they will not be censured by us ; for we admit in the most unrestrained sense, the right of every man to think for himself in matters of religion, and apprehend that this right extends to judging of the importance of opinions as well as of the truth of them. We wish not to prevent the discussion of what we deem the genuine principles of christianity, but to procure for them an impartial and candid examination : by this means we trust that the truth will at length prevail, and the welfare of the human race be greatly advanced.”

A LETTER,

"In laying down the above principles, we do not mean to limit the activity of the Society, which every Society professes, or determining the object for which it is collected, and to the promoting a particular cause to which they are devoted. No one can really doubt that he is justified or aggrieved thereby. It seems almost that in to form Societies for promoting each virtue of the Christian Religion as the different fragments we mentioned, they have an undoubted right to do so, and they will not be deterred by us; for we admit of the most unreserved liberty, the right of every man to think for himself in matters of religion, and to defend that this right extends to judging of the importance of opinions as well as of the truth of them. We will not to prevent the discussion of what we deem the genuine principles of Christianity, but to procure for them an impartial and candid examination; by this means we trust that the truth will at length prevail, and the welfare of the human race be greatly advanced."

LETTER, &c.

S I R,

IT was not perhaps your intention, or your wish, that certain communications which you lately made to Mr. ——— should be laid before the public. The members of the society to which they refer have judged proper, nevertheless, to give them, if possible, a general circulation. This they have done, in order to inform their neighbours, and their countrymen, that, no cause being assigned, no crime being imputed, they have been forbidden to assemble in a dissenting meeting-house— forbidden to use it simply for a purpose “ which their ancestors have been accustomed to glory in, that of worshipping the Great God, according to the dictates of their own consciences*.”

* See Correspondence, &c. No. VII.

B

In

In this prohibition, Sir, you concurred. With you, in truth, it seems to have originated. It was you who had *the pleasure* of informing Mr. —, that such a step was in contemplation; and, when it was actually resolved upon, you had the farther *pleasure* of communicating this intelligence to the same gentleman*. Be not surprised, then, that I now address myself to *you*. Of those, indeed, who voted with you upon the above occasion I have no knowledge; but to your name, person, and character, I am not altogether a stranger. You, Sir, I have been accustomed to think, are well able to give a reason for your conduct: yet, how does it happen that, in the case before us, you have stated none? The information which you convey, the resolution which you signify, is unaccompanied by any explanation. What, let me ask, are we to conclude from this silence? It is not, surely, honourable to yourself: it is not fair and candid with regard to the society of which I have the happiness to be a member.

* Correspondence, &c. Nos. IV. and VI.

Whether,

Whether, upon the subject in question, you did not exceed your province as *one of the trustees for the* ———, it were useless to inquire. The power which you claimed and exercised is not, I believe, generally understood to be your legal right. I imagine, that the property of the meeting-house is vested in your hands, not for any purposes of your own, but for a determinate and specific object. You hold it, as appears to me, for the use of ministers regularly chosen by the subscribers. These ministers are elected, I conceive, to perform religious worship, and to deliver religious instruction, whenever they may themselves think proper, or when any persons are inclined to attend them. If your deed of trust resemble the instruments which are employed for the security of other dissenting chapels, such is its nature—such, undoubtedly, its end. Now, what was the purport of the public notice which Mr. ——— read at ———, and which he received from one of the ministers who had been thus chosen? It merely stated, that a sermon would be preached in that place, on the day appointed for the annual meeting of the society of Unitarian Christians.

tians*. All which it signified was, that a religious service would be performed there at a particular time. It had the sanction likewise of one of the regular ministers †. Your interference with that minister, therefore, in this appointment, was in direct opposition, I presume, to the nature of your trust. Should you plead that "the person nominated to officiate on the above day was a stranger, and not one of the ministers belonging to the congregation," this, I presume, would make no difference in the question. According to my views of the subject, the right of asking strangers to preach occasionally, is the right of the minister himself, and not of the trustees: it is not to them exclusively, but to the congregation at large, that he is amenable, if he abuse this right. Neither can you object with justice, that "the notice given upon this occasion intimated a design of admitting strangers;" and such, unquestionably, were most of the persons composing the Unitarian Society. You need not be told, Sir, that all places of

* Correspondence, &c. No. I.

† Correspondence, &c. No. III.

public worship are necessarily accessible to strangers of every description, by the same legal authority under which they continue to be opened. The only strangers whom you are empowered to exclude, are those who claim the right of using your chapel in opposition to the ministers regularly chosen, or to the subscribers who usually assemble in it. A stranger may occupy the pulpit, provided he obtain the leave of one of the settled ministers; and strangers who meet to hear him are countenanced and protected by the law. I cannot avoid being of opinion, then, that you and your coadjutors have lately done more than was authorized by the terms and intention of your trust. With ———, however, I am not qualified to contest this point. I am neither concerned nor disposed, moreover, to proceed in the investigation of it; and I cheerfully leave it to be examined by those who are interested in the decision.

But allowing that you are legally possessed of this prerogative, still it was our wish to have known from yourself, why it is now roused from its peaceful slumbers, and

called into exercise. You owed, Sir, to your own character, an ingenuous statement of your motives : for it could hardly be your desire, that we should suspect you of acting from considerations which you are ashamed or afraid to disclose. In justice also to the society, the grounds of your opposition ought to have been distinctly assigned. Our sentiments, or our conduct, must, in your opinion, be exceedingly obnoxious, since you would not suffer the meeting-house of which you are a trustee to be opened for our admission. Now, is it not highly injurious thus to arraign and condemn us, whilst you offer no proof of our demerit? Sir, if you can find such proof, let it be instantly produced. We are not, I trust, unprepared for our defence, should defence be necessary. The impartial public will judge between us.

It may be, that local circumstances occasioned, in part, our exclusion from —— meeting-house. This exclusion, possibly, might likewise proceed from a misapprehension of our principles and views as Unitarians. But whatever motives influenced yourself and your associates,

associates, your proceedings do not appear to be approved by many of the dissenters in ——. To a large proportion of the number, I may safely affirm, it is the subject of sincere and deep regret, that we were thus prevented from assembling for religious service, agreeably to the notice given by Mr. ——. Of the temper by which some of them in particular are actuated, we have a pleasing indication in the note received from the trustees and others of the ————; a note which breathes the pure spirit of christian liberality, and which far exceeds all the praise that I am able to bestow. Amongst the regular attendants at that place of worship, there are few, I learn, who have embraced the Unitarian doctrine. They know, however, that perfect unanimity of sentiment is not requisite to an union in evangelical benevolence; and in this persuasion they have behaved with a kindness and friendship which reflect upon them the most genuine honour.

You might probably conceive, Sir, that, *for the use of ———— meeting-house, application should have been made to the trustees. As no such request was presented to you, the exercise of*

your authority might be thought nothing more than a seasonable assertion of your privilege, and the just punishment of our neglect *. But, not to observe that your rightful possession of this privilege is extremely doubtful, you must admit that custom and precedent are entirely against you. To solicit "the permission of the trustees" for giving notice relative to an occasional sermon intended to be preached in a dissenting chapel, is a thing unheard of amongst us. This being the case, no disrespect could be implied in our silence ; and no reasonable person can be of opinion that disrespect was meant. Even could I grant that we were mistaken, it must be acknowledged, however, that you should have treated our error with less harshness and with greater candour.

* I perceive, that the reviewer in the Gentleman's Magazine for August 1794, speaks of the trustees as really influenced by this motive, in their refusal of ——— meeting-house. The sources from which he derives his intelligence, are, perhaps, of a private nature. If this be the case, I am not permitted to question their authenticity. I have only to express a wish, that the motive had been avowed by Mr. ——— and his friends in a manner less ambiguous and indirect.

But

But farther; *Individuals belonging to our society you, perhaps, dislike.* It is at least possible, that some degree of personal aversion might contribute its influence upon the present occasion. Yet it ought not, surely, to have been thus expressed. And it is the dictate of common justice, that a body of men should not be involved in the supposed demerits of single members.

Could I think, however, that your recent behaviour had its origin solely in circumstances of a private nature, I would not trouble you with this public address. These circumstances, indeed, might have their weight; but I am much deceived, Sir, if you were not principally governed by considerations which apply to us in general as Unitarians. I am happy, therefore, in the opportunity hence afforded me, of making a few observations upon the motives from which we have formed ourselves into a society; at the same time that I gladly take this occasion of vindicating our characters against some popular calumnies, which are industriously spread by the interested, and readily believed by the ignorant.

It is not improbable that *you may esteem our existence, and our interviews, as a society, altogether unnecessary.* Of such necessity, however, you must permit us to judge rather from our own convictions, than from what may be thought or said by others. Here we ask nothing but what we cheerfully grant. Let us suppose that a number of gentlemen peaceably associate in order to advance the study of natural history, as taught by the most approved philosophers: what opinion would you entertain of him who attempted to obstruct their labours, and to prevent their meetings, from the plea that there subsisted no necessity for either? You would not fail to condemn his interference; you would not hesitate to declare, “although this person be strictly justified in declining to join the society, yet his interruption of it is indefensible.” Such, undoubtedly, Sir, would be your conclusion; and to yourself I leave the application.

But it is of little consequence, you will say, to what articles of faith men subscribe, provided they be honest and sincere: so that for your zeal and earnestness respecting points of doctrine there is no reasonable occasion. Such, nevertheless,
we

we freely acknowledge, is not our language. Far be it from us, indeed, to regard our distinguishing tenets as essential to salvation. Yet we think highly of their importance ; and to the importance, as well as the truth of them, the right of private judgment certainly extends. Hence we deem it our indispensable duty to diffuse, as widely and effectually as possible, those views of the Christian revelation which we believe to be just and scriptural. Some may deride ; others may unhandfomely oppose ; there are those who may threaten and injure us. But we still consider ourselves as under the strongest obligation to confess our Divine Master “ before men,” and not to be ashamed of him, or of his words. The dictates of our understandings and consciences must alone determine our conduct. “ Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind ;” but let him not disturb another in the exercise of his Christian liberty : this were to violate the memorable rule of equity, “ Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.”

For myself, Sir, I am so far from looking upon religious truth as of trifling moment,

that I think it unspeakably more valuable than any other kind of truth. In all endeavours to investigate and promote it, I cordially rejoice. I honour the serious Christian, of whatever denomination, who thus employs his time and his abilities. To me it appears one amongst our first duties, to bear testimony to it in the most public and explicit manner. I say this, from a firm conviction, that the principles of religion are eminently adapted to advance the greatest happiness of man in every stage of his existence. You, also, believe in Christianity, and will not, surely, dispute the justness of the assertion. Why, indeed, do we speak of the gospel as an inestimable blessing to the world, but on account of its tendency to reform the hearts and lives of men, by enlightening them with information upon those subjects in which their dearest interests are concerned? It may be added, that the period when Christian truth was professed in the purest state, was likewise the period when Christian virtue most flourished. Error and superstition have usually been fruitful sources of vice. Our religion cannot exert its full influence upon the moral character,

rafter, if its real doctrines be disregarded, or if false ones be mixed with what are genuine. In our attempts, therefore, to bring others to a knowledge of the truth, we are fufficiently justified, as well by the importance of the object, as by the precepts and example of Jesus Christ, our illustrious “ forerunner *.”

Were Christianity, indeed, a fable and a dream, we might not be thus folicitous to preserve it “ pure and undefiled.” If the fundamental principle of our fociety were not peculiarly momentous ; if the evils which have followed a departure from the absolute unity of God were few and inconfiderable ; if the infringement of this grand truth had not given rife to polytheifm and idolatry ; if it had not ferved to expofe our religion to contempt, to deftroy its fimplicity, to deform its beauty, to check its progrefs, to oppofe its efficacy ; we might not think our exertions fo highly requifite. In this cafe, we might fatisfy ourfelves with the concealment, or the difguife, of our fentiments. We might be contented to facrifice them at the fhrine of

* Hebrews, ch. vi. ver. 20.

interest, popularity and fashion. But if it be true that effects of the most lamentable nature have resulted from the gross errors which we are desirous of counteracting, our conduct must unavoidably be different. You, Sir, are not ignorant that such effects have really taken place ; and you cannot pretend that our labours are unnecessary.

To these labours, again, you cannot object, that they have no relation to the end proposed. In the words of our printed declaration, “ we have thought proper to associate ourselves together, in order to distribute among those who are disposed to inquire, such books as appear to us to contain the purest account of the doctrines of revelation, and to be the best calculated to promote the interests of true piety and virtue.” This we judge to be the most adviseable method of diffusing our sentiments : for, by means of the press, truth may be advanced with most calmness, and therefore with the best prospect of success. And since many writings are in circulation, the design and tendency of which we cannot approve; to distribute books of a contrary description

tion is a fair and honourable mode of opposition.

But the perusal of controversial books, you may remark, cannot be useful. I observe, in answer, that, however some persons despise and censure controversy, we are indebted to it for the most solid benefits. Its evils have been temporary and partial; its advantages, lasting and universal. What are styled its evils, indeed, have proceeded chiefly from the furious temper with which it has too frequently been exercised. But it certainly may be conducted, and, upon some occasions, has, in fact, been conducted, with a spirit of candour and benevolence. In reality, if truth be important, controversy is necessary and important; for by discussion and reasoning alone can truth be elucidated, defended and promoted. History attests the mighty influence of opinion upon human affairs; and it farther attests the folly and impolicy of preventing a free and impartial examination of opinion. The most interesting events in the annals of mankind have been accomplished, not so much by external force, as by the unconfined exertion of the intellectual faculties. Had it not, Sir, been for inquiry and contro-

controversy, our release from the bondage of heathenism and popery, in particular, would never have been effected; and the purity of Christian truth, I may venture to assert, can only by the same means be guarded and improved.

There are, I know, those who, with a suspicious clamour, decry controversy. They always use the word in an unfavourable sense; condemning, under the obnoxious epithets *polemical* and *controversial*, the most important discussions in which the minds of men can possibly be engaged. Persons of sense and reflection, however, will not hastily reprobate those labours in which the best and wisest of our race have toiled. What, Sir, were Newton, Locke, and Hartley; what were Clarke and Hoadly; but controversial writers? Every author who attacks prevailing error, and opposes the mistaken notions of his predecessors or contemporaries, is a controversial writer. But controversy is so far from being useless or disgraceful, that, when employed upon interesting topics, and conducted with candour and discretion, it is in the highest degree honourable and advantageous.

The

The intricacies of school-divinity, the nice refinements and the distinguishing phraseology of theological systems, have no place in the books which we recommend and circulate. It is the simple object of these publications to convince men, that “there is one God, and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus;” and farther to teach them, that “this is life eternal to know Jehovah to be the only true God, and Jesus to be the Christ whom he has sent.” In these publications there is nothing contradictory and unintelligible, nothing to perplex the understanding of the reader, to distract his feelings, to cast a gloom on his accustomed cheerfulness, or to call forth his angry passions. The evils, therefore, which, justly or unjustly, have been imputed to controversial writings, cannot be charged upon those which our society disperses. We conceive, that the best way of destroying error is to avow and diffuse truth. The subject to which we solicit the attention of our fellow-christians, is confessedly important; nor can it, with reason, be alleged, that the means employed are unsuitable or insufficient.

But you may ask, *granting that it be proper*

to distribute books with the view of spreading a belief in the divine unity, why might not you have contented yourselves, as individuals, with the more private circulation of these books in your respective neighbourhoods? Such is the language which I once heard. The opinion conveyed by it may probably be yours. To ourselves, however, it seems that our *public association*, as Unitarian Christians, is peculiarly desirable. More can be done by a society, than by the unassisted efforts of individual persons; the countenance of others cheers and animates us in the prosecution of our undertaking; our interviews and co-operation are well calculated to increase our mutual benevolence; and our testimony to what we regard as the cause of truth, is thus more direct and undisguised. Why, too, should not the world know that there are persons who feel an ardent concern for the interests of primitive and genuine Christianity? Curiosity will hence be in some degree awakened; and curiosity, we may hope, will terminate in conviction.

It has been objected, again, that *a public association for the avowal and diffusion of religious opinions, will give to those opinions a foreign*
and

and undue support. I readily allow, Sir, that no consideration should lead us to embrace any sentiments, whether they relate to religion, or to other topics, beside a persuasion of their truth. It must further be granted, that we shall feel no common disappointment, if the very measure which we adopt with the view of inducing mankind to investigate and decide for themselves, have the contrary effect. However, if the objection be applicable to religion, it is applicable likewise to every subject in which *opinion* is concerned. Upon this principle, then, persons whose situations and characters are respectable, should not appear in those places of worship, where the service is conducted agreeably to their own ideas; since it is at least a possible case, that their neighbours may hence be seduced into an unreasonable partiality for those sentiments of the Christian doctrine, which such persons entertain and profess. Neither, upon this ground, should they *publicly* testify their approbation of an hospital, a charity school, or other similar institutions. Here also, their learning, their talents, or their virtues, may unjustly influence the opinions and the actions of those
around

around them. In short, if we pursue the argument to its proper consequences, we shall find that it strongly opposes the laudable and useful inclination which almost every man feels to act in concert with his fellow-creatures. It is certainly the wish of our society, to procure the attention of men to the important truths which are stated in our declaration. But it cannot with justice or candour be said, that they will be biassed in favour of these truths, by our personal or collective influence. We have neither the ability nor the desire to awe by power, to dazzle by honours, or to bribe by riches. Intellectual and moral attainments are not confined to us; and even if they were, still, in the present state of society, they have comparatively few and inconsiderable attractions for the world in general. The bulk of mankind are far more strongly swayed by external circumstances. When they perceive, indeed, that doctrines commonly esteemed false and dangerous are maintained by some amongst the wise and good, their prejudice against such doctrines may in a certain degree be removed. Our public association, perhaps, may thus assist the

the

the progress of the Unitarian principles ; and it will not be an unnatural, an unfair, or a dishonourable assistance. But interest and ambition, notwithstanding, will prevail for the moment. These and other kindred qualities are leagued against the cause of truth. It may surely, therefore, be permitted us to counteract their effects, by the union and the exercise of better qualities. If we may judge from fact, there is small probability that our distinguishing tenets will owe their advancement to an extrinsic aid which is not congenial with their nature. We cannot, we wish not to diffuse them in any other way than in the simple and fearless manifestation of their exact conformity with reason and with scripture.

If it be said, *As friends to the right of private judgment, and the exercise of impartial and free inquiry, you ought to circulate not only those books which are written in favour of your religious sentiments, but such likewise as are drawn up professedly in opposition to them ;* I reply, neither is this measure necessary to be pursued by our society, nor is it required from us as consistent Protestants. In controversial
pieces,

pieces, on whatever side, principles which are attacked, arguments which are disputed, cannot well be concealed from the knowledge of the reader. Beside which, it may naturally be supposed, that where Christians admit the truth, and feel the importance, of their distinguishing opinions, they will generally combat zeal by zeal, nor fail to distribute tracts with the express view of spreading abroad the sentiments which they respectively embrace. So that by this method all denominations may jointly encourage the discussion of religious doctrines; whilst, however, each preserves itself from "even the appearance" of hypocrisy on the one hand, or of indifference on the other.

With the history of Unitarianism in this country, Sir, you are not, perhaps, unacquainted. Now, it may safely be presumed, that had those of its friends who lived about the end of the last century, continued to maintain a distinct society, for the purpose of avowing and diffusing their sentiments, Christian truth would by this time have been more generally known and professed*. Since it has

* See Toulmin's Life of Biddle, p. 68.

been

been courageously declared in the face of day, it has no doubt spread with greater rapidity, than when it resembled "a light placed beneath a bushel." But it has suffered by nothing so much as by the reluctance of its votaries to exhibit it in all its lustre, before the eyes of their fellow-christians.

Yet it may be pleaded by you, that *the meeting of the society, if not unnecessary, was at least inexpedient*. If, however, you were convinced that it was improper we should assemble, why did not you state to us the reasons of your conviction? For such a communication you would have been entitled to our thanks.

Considerations of expediency and prudence, we would not, Sir, be understood to despise, when they do not interfere with acknowledged duty. But it yet remains to be proved that our design to assemble in the chapel of which you are a trustee, was a violation of either. It has not hitherto been shewn that we infringed upon the one or the other, when we accepted a most generous and unsolicited invitation to meet elsewhere. The words *expediency* and *prudence*, indeed, have different

ferent senses, as they are used by different persons. Some men have the faculty of being more easily alarmed than others; and some may call that conduct inexpedient and imprudent, which to their less informed, or less fearful, neighbours appears perfectly innocent.

But in what respects, Sir, let me now ask you, was our meeting improper? *Because it might tend to excite prejudice and religious animosity?* If this objection be valid, nothing should ever be said, nothing should ever be written, with the view of subduing error and of advancing truth: for persons will always be found, whom attempts of this nature offend and irritate. Should this consideration be allowed its force, the freedom of the press ought instantly to be limited; and the works of those who are deservedly regarded as the greatest benefactors of mankind should be prevented from circulation. Nothing, however, which is just and important, nothing which is an object of duty, ought to be abandoned, merely from the probability that there are those to whom it is obnoxious. In the pursuit of a worthy and momentous object we should persevere with steadfastness; exercising,

exercising, at the same time, a spirit of candour and benevolence toward those from whom we differ.

If, with such a spirit, those Christians who most dislike our religious sentiments associate to diffuse their own, we shall not be offended. We shall rejoice, on the contrary, in the prospect hence afforded us, that divine truth will the more speedily prevail, and the more firmly be established. Nor shall we indulge any resentment, should the members of this society meet annually for religious worship. We shall even be truly glad to accommodate them with the use of our chapels, if, like ourselves, they are excluded from one in which it was their intention to have assembled.

In the eye of reason, Sir, we can offend no description of our fellow Christians by our peaceful efforts. But if any be so unjust as to be angry upon the occasion, we cannot sacrifice our own convictions and feelings to their prejudices. Such a sacrifice is not enjoined, nay, is expressly prohibited, by our common faith. Although we affect not

to undervalue the good opinion of mankind, yet it certainly should be our first study to shew ourselves approved unto God. Upon subjects of small importance, we might be vindicated in yielding to the sentiments of others; whereas in the affairs of religion there is no room for such accommodation.

It may be thought, however, *that we should better conciliate the affections of our neighbours by a gradual and partial disclosure of our religious opinions.* To this allegation I reply, that, believing these opinions to be true and important, we could not justify ourselves in the concealment of them, even in part, from our fellow men. According to our views, Christianity is no intricate and complex system, which cannot be at once taught and comprehended. Its doctrines are few and simple; nor can the wise and good be offended with the most undisguised profession of them, if made “with meekness and fear.” In shunning to declare “the whole counsel of God,” moreover, we should be condemned by the example of our Lord and his apostles. Truth, Sir, requires only to be known and
avowed,

avowed, in order to be at length universally received ; and facts shew, that it has been essentially injured by a temporizing spirit.

Some, too, may suppose, *that the times are unfavourable to the explicit declaration of our sentiments.* It may be said, *that the minds of men are fully occupied by other subjects, and are by no means friendly to religious speculation.* Now, to assertion, Sir, assertion may properly be opposed. I cannot hesitate to affirm, that the explicit declaration of divine truth is in all seasons a duty. The consequences of it we cannot foresee, and ought not to regard. In the present state of things, religious speculation may in some degree be unfashionable : but there are, doubtless, many persons whom it highly interests ; and it can never be unfit to call the public attention to topics of the first importance. Beside, infidelity is thought to be increasing ; and infidelity, perhaps, arises, for the most part, from mistaken apprehensions concerning the nature of Christianity : so that it peculiarly becomes us, by the profession of our religion in what we conceive to be its purest state, to check, if possible, the progress of unbelief.

I am informed, Sir, that *there are persons who censure us, because we assume exclusively the name of Unitarians.* So obvious, so important, is the doctrine of the divine unity, that the denial of it is disclaimed by all Christians, although it has long been forgotten by the majority! For, can they be called *Unitarians*, who address their prayers to three distinct persons? Or have they a claim to the appellation, who not only worship the Supreme Being, but offer religious adoration also to a creature, and ascribe to that creature the perfections of divinity? The term is manifestly expressive of our peculiar sentiments; and has the farther advantage of not implying an attachment to a leader.

You will not be surprised or offended, Sir, that I speak of Jesus Christ as *a creature.* In this light, I conceive, the New Testament uniformly represents him: it plainly describes him as having received from God his existence and his powers, and as equally dependent with ourselves upon that Great Being who is the parent of him and of all mankind. I must add, that the scriptures point him out to me simply as a *human* creature. As such, I find, he was foretold to the Jews; in consequence

quence of which prediction, although they expected him to appear as a mighty conqueror and monarch, yet they never supposed, that he would be more than man. My faith in the doctrine of our Lord's proper humanity is considerably strengthened, when I observe that his history, delivered to us by the evangelists, is the history, not of a God, not of an angelic and pre-existent spirit, but of one who in all respects was like unto ourselves, excepting, indeed, that he was distinguished by extraordinary and divine communications. He was born, he lived, he spoke, he acted, he was tempted, like other men. His bodily frame, his mental constitution, was that of a man. Like the rest of our race, he was subject to hunger and thirst, to pain and fatigue, to suffering and death. To his disciples, and to others, he always speaks of himself as being a man; and never do they seem to have indulged the thought, that he was of higher rank. Had he been something more, he would not, surely, have withholden the information from his immediate followers; and it is impossible that they should not have mentioned him un-

der his true denomination. When, however, I look into their writings, I discern no expression which leads me to conceive, that they had any other idea of their honoured master, than that of "a man approved of God by miracles, and wonders, and signs, which God did by him." In their discourses and their epistles, in passages too numerous to be here produced, and in terms as clear and express as language can furnish, they declare him to have been a man. They build upon this important truth some momentous arguments, and deduce from it some striking practical exhortations. One of them, in particular, states the resurrection of Christ to be the pattern and the assurance of ours, because it was the resurrection of a man*: so that, if the doctrine be not strictly agreeable to fact, his reasoning is evidently inconclusive. It is my conviction likewise, that the real humanity of Jesus gives to his example all the force and persuasion which it possesses, all the consolation which it administers; whilst it imparts to the prospects of Christians peculiar dignity and animation. Hence I reflect

* 1 Cor. xv. 21.

with additional confidence and pleasure, that “because he lives, we” whom he calls his brethren “shall live also;” hence I meditate with more solid delight on the consideration, that he has ascended “unto his Father and our Father, to his God and our God;” and hence I more gratefully admire the wisdom and goodness of the Almighty in ordaining “the *man* Christ Jesus” to judge the world. Finally; when I read the New Testament, I cannot avoid noticing that the honour and glory which our Lord now enjoys, are there said to be solely the reward of his labours and sufferings on earth*; an assertion this which is absolutely inconsistent with his supposed divinity or pre-existence.

At the same time, Sir, I am not ignorant, that by the advocates for these doctrines many texts are brought forward in their support. It must be allowed, however, that the general tenor of the scriptures is clearly decisive as to the proper unity of God, and the real humanity of Christ. Few are the passages which may seem to have a contrary meaning. Examine them by the rules of fair criticism and interpretation, and they will not

* Philip. ii. 8, 9.

be found irreconcilable with these grand and leading truths *. To state and to defend the evidence for our principles, is one great purpose of our society. They who differ from us have perfect liberty to act the same part, with regard to the tenets which themselves maintain; and we shall willingly commit the result to the inquiries of serious and impartial persons.

But *the nature and object of our meeting*, you might think, *were liable to be grossly mistaken and misrepresented*. And what conduct, what proceedings, Sir, are not exposed to the same misfortune?

* Texts which are pronounced conclusive for our Lord's pre-existence and deity ought to be compared with similar expressions used by the same speaker, or writer, upon the same, or a like, occasion. For example; if I wish to know what Christ means when he prays (John xvii. 5.) that he might be glorified with *the glory which he had with his Father before the world was*, I learn from verses 22d and 24th of the chapter, that it was *a glory designed for him by the gracious being who loved him before the foundation of the world*, that it was a glory communicable to his disciples, and that he speaks of it as given by him to them. Hence, and from John xii. 23, amongst other places, I infer, that this glory was the privilege of seeing his religion to be in some degree successful and efficacious: and it is described as *given* to him and his followers, because they were at present

misfortune ? Our experience teaches us, I grant, that the principles and views which we entertain as Unitarians, are spoken of in terms the most erroneous and unjust. "All manner of evil" is said against us falsely ; but we have learnt, I hope, not to be discouraged or terrified by this consideration. We are persuaded, that to those who seek occasion to reproach us, we have afforded no such occasion. The mistakes of honest men upon the subject we could wish to rectify ; but we

sent almost in the actual possession of it. Again ; I am instructed by John xvii. 18, that when Jesus speaks of himself, or is represented by any writers of the New Testament, as *sent into the world*, this does not imply a literal and local descent from heaven, but only his divine commission. For he here declares, "as thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them (*i. e.* my disciples) into the world." Once more ; I am taught by verses 21st and 22d of this chapter, that the union which is mentioned as subsisting between God and Jesus Christ, is an union which may subsist also between God and Christ and Christ's true disciples ; an union, that is, of benevolent intention in favour of the salvation and happiness of mankind. I can truly affirm, that I was led to embrace the doctrine of Christ's simple humanity, by a perusal of the New Testament, with a strict regard to the connection and agreement of the several controverted passages.

shall not hence be induced to depart from the line of conduct which we have thought proper to adopt. We should incur the guilt of indulging that fear of man which "bringeth a snare;" we should virtually deny Christ before men; did we shrink from what we conceive to be our duty, because our views are open to misapprehension. If our object as a society were different from our avowed design, hardly should we choose to meet in public, and thus invite the attention of the world. In making a fair and ingenuous statement of this object, we have done all within our power to prevent misrepresentation.

Our meeting, however, you might perhaps imagine, would bring danger upon ourselves; and upon those with whom we are immediately or remotely connected. For such an apprehension, Sir, there could be no proper foundation; although I am inclined to believe that it might be entertained by yourself and your associates. Yet, surely, your exclusion of us from ——— meeting-house, was on this very ground exceedingly injudicious; since it tended to expose us to real danger, and to point us out as objects of jealousy and suspicion to the ignorant

rant

rant and lawless. Now, if, in consequence of this measure, we had experienced the effects of popular violence, it is impossible to say where the mischief might have ended. You, and your friends, might have shared in the evils of which you would have been, in truth, the unintentional authors. It would have been the better policy, undoubtedly, to have preserved silence upon the subject, and to have permitted us to assemble in peace agreeably to our wishes. A report of what had passed between you and Mr. ——— naturally gave a notoriety and formidable aspect to our meeting, which it might not otherwise have possessed.

I have already observed, that we are the mark of calumny: it directs against us its most envenomed shafts. There are those who do not blush to call us disloyal subjects, and who assert, that, under the mask of religion, we are endeavouring to destroy by violence the civil and ecclesiastical establishments of our country. Excuse me, Sir, if I remark, that you, possibly, may be in the number of those who have been deceived into a belief of such assertions. Perhaps then, it was on

this ground, that you procured our exclusion from ——— meeting-house.

The fact, however, is, that our meeting as Unitarians, had no more connection with politics than with chemistry, with medicine, or with agriculture. I can assure you, Sir, if you need the assurance, that the object of our societies is purely religious. Neither the ravings of Burke *, nor the invectives of Horsley, nor the feeble declarations of their feeble imitators, will persuade impartial persons, that it is of a different kind. Concerning public bodies of men, you can only judge from their professions and their conduct; and it is the extreme of injustice to impute views and designs to them which they utterly disclaim.

“The Unitarians are bad and disaffected subjects.” It is no presumption in favour of

* The debt of nature has now been paid by this celebrated man. Whatever his principles and his motives, it can scarcely be doubted but that he was a chief instigator of the war which is desolating and terrifying the continent of Europe. His eloquence, often grand and beautiful in the highest degree, was not seldom, however, a disorderly exhibition; and “the ravings” to which I refer, were, perhaps, the excesses of an overheated imagination wrought upon by an ungoverned sensibility.

this

this charge, that it proceeds from men who, being unable to controvert the truth of our religious sentiments, attempt by these shameless accusations to prevent their progress. It is no presumption in its favour, that it comes from those who have too well succeeded in exposing us to the frowns of the court and the outrages of the mob. "The Unitarians are bad and disaffected subjects." But what proof of this disaffection has been adduced? Has it been made to appear, that they have disobeyed the laws, or violated the tranquillity, of their country? Has it been heard, that they have burned the habitations, destroyed the property, insulted the persons, or threatened the lives, of their peaceful neighbours?

The Unitarians, it may be said, nevertheless, *are enemies to the doctrines and the existence of the established church.* Some of its leading doctrines, indeed, are, in our judgment, gross corruptions of Christianity, and we consider it as our duty to oppose them by every proper and honourable method. We have yet to learn, however, that this is a crime or a fault. Many of us too, I have no hesitation in avowing, are far from believing an alliance between church
and

and state to be really expedient or useful. This latter opinion, notwithstanding, is by no means characteristic of us as Unitarians: it is maintained by the dissenters at large, and by several who do not rank with dissenters. But whatever be our sentiments upon these subjects, “the weapons of our warfare,” Sir, “are not carnal.” Our cause neither requires nor allows the use of violence. This we have experienced, but never employed. We content ourselves with combating by argument and discussion what we regard as error, and confide in time and increasing knowledge for the prevalence of truth. It is our desire to live in friendship with the wise and virtuous of every denomination; and we should blush, could we imagine, that we were capable of disturbing our brethren of the establishment in the exercise of their worship.

Upon political measures and political events we cannot fail to reflect much as *individuals*. As *a body*, however, we have no other bond of union than our religious profession. It would not be wonderful if the spirit of free inquiry which we cherish and recommend in examining subjects of theology, should

should carry us farther in our speculations upon other points, than those of our fellow-citizens to whom this spirit is unknown. I must acknowledge likewise, that the unmerited treatment which Unitarians have lately received, is not calculated to conciliate and soothe them. Still, I can undertake to affirm, that we wish for no reform, no amendment, which is not also desired by many of our neighbours; that, like them, we deprecate convulsion; and that there is nothing which we are so anxious to avert as violence and tumult. Let our bitterest enemy prove, if he can, that our conduct in any instance has been inconsistent with our profession. With regard to opinion, we have ever been accustomed to view it as the first privilege of Englishmen undauntedly to avow their sentiments, whilst they are obedient to the laws. In some former times, the silence upon political topics, which it is now so fashionable to inculcate, would have been considered as inauspicious to the very existence of the liberties of Britain.

But Unitarians, I shall be told, rejoiced in the French revolution. And did Unitarians alone rejoice in it? Yet, after all, Sir, where
is

is the guilt? It is one thing to approve of the end; another to approve of the means. As Men, as Britons, I will add as Christians and as Protestants, but not peculiarly as Unitarians, we exulted in the fair prospect of increasing felicity which then opened upon the world. We sincerely lament, that an event so noble in itself, so glorious in its tendency, has since been tarnished by follies and by crimes. For the civil and religious liberties of mankind we feel a warm concern. It were unjust to suppose, that you, Sir, are a stranger to this generous emotion. But we are not more desirous than yourself to accomplish even the best object in an unlawful manner. We reflect with equal pain upon scenes of cruelty and death, whether republicans or monarchists be the actors. Such, indeed, are our habits of life, and such our situation in society, as to render the wish of employing violence the remotest from our thoughts; and government has less to dread from us than from its interested and fervile admirers.

I will beg leave, Sir, to quote in this place some excellent remarks of Mr. Hall. They are contained in his masterly answer to Mr.

Clayton's

Clayton's sermon; and his performance, full of vigour and eloquence, is well deserving of your serious perusal. As the author is not himself an Unitarian, his observations are hence entitled to greater attention.

“An Unitarian,” says this ingenious writer, “is a person who believes Jesus Christ had no existence till he appeared on our earth, whilst a Trinitarian maintains that he existed with the Father from all eternity. What possible connection can we discern between these opinions and the subject of government?” p. 56. —“As there is no foundation in the nature of things for imagining any alliance between heretical tenets and the principles of freedom, this notion is equally devoid of support from fact or history. Were the Socinian sentiments in particular productive of any peculiar impatience under the restraints of government, this effect could not fail of having made its appearance on their first rise in Poland, while their influence was fresh and vigorous; but nothing of this nature occurs, nor was any such reproach cast upon them*. That sect in

* I will embrace this opportunity of reminding my readers in general, that Unitarians disclaim a leading article of *Socinianism*,

England which has always been most conspicuous for the love of freedom have, for the most part, held sentiments at the greatest remove from Socinianism that can be imagined."—p. 59. "There are not wanting reasons which, at first view, might induce us to conclude Unitarianism was less favourable to the love of freedom than almost any other system of religious belief. If any party of Christians were ever free from the least tincture of enthusiasm, it is the Unitarian: yet that passion has, by every philosopher, been judged friendly to liberty; and to its influence, though perhaps improperly, some of its most distinguished exertions have been ascribed. Every pretence for confounding the attachment to freedom with the sentiments of a religious party, is most abundantly confuted both from reason and from fact."—p. 61.

It is not a little remarkable, Sir, that the charge of political disaffection, so malignantly advanced against Unitarians, is but of recent

Socinianism, the worship of Jesus Christ. The Socinian sentiments had certainly their first rise in Poland: Unitarianism was the faith of the Apostles and of the earliest Christians.

date.

date. Formerly, it comprehended the dissenters in general. It was reserved for the sagacity and holy zeal of a modern Sacheverell to discover, that in the principles of Unitarianism are contained more especially the seeds of disloyalty and rebellion. This was the last resource of our "foiled polemic." In the close of his controversy with Dr. Priestley, he brought against that illustrious character an accusation of this nature, which he never attempted to support. Not long since, he preferred the same accusation against the Unitarians at large; which *The Welch Freeholder* has ably shewn to be a gross and shameless calumny*. Our ecclesiastical crusader has substituted invective for argument, and has thus afforded a fresh triumph to his antagonists and to truth.

Truth, Sir, cannot be established by slander and railing. She rejects the services of Horsley, but cheerfully acknowledges her obligations to Priestley. Forgive me, that I here advert to this "great, injured name." He has left our country, it is true; but he has still

* See his Farewell Epistles to the Bishop of St. David's.

the strongest claim upon our gratitude and esteem. I consider him at present solely as a divine. Although we "call no man master upon earth," yet must we own, that to his talents, his learning, his diligence and his zeal we are more indebted than we are capable of expressing. Few have done so much and so well in illustrating the evidences of our common Christianity; scarcely any so much in defending and supporting our principles as Unitarians. No writer has shewn so successfully, that these principles have the sanction, not only of reason and of scripture, but of the remotest antiquity. In future times, therefore, when posterity shall dwell with thankfulness, admiration and rapture upon the names of Wickliffe, Luther, and other celebrated champions of our religion, that of Priestley shall not be forgotten. We feel not the less attachment to him because he has been persecuted. They alone who are ignorant of his writings and his life can suppose, that he deserved the treatment which he unhappily received. It is too common, Sir, even with those from whom better things might be expected, to speak of him as a dangerous political character. I
would

would candidly believe, that of the persons who make the assertion, many are unacquainted with his works. His publications on civil government are comparatively few. They relate chiefly to general topics, and contain little that is of a local or temporary nature, nothing that is hostile to peace, to liberty and to order. His manners are unusually mild; his conduct the most exemplary and blameless. Why then was he thus the object of hatred, violence and insult? Why was his residence amongst us rendered hazardous and unsafe? Why, in his declining years, was he induced to exchange his native shores for a foreign land? It is not any thing strange or new which has happened to him. His undaunted and efficacious labours in the cause of religious truth have displeased, irritated, enraged. Like the wisest and best men of every age and nation, he has experienced calumny and suffering. Yet are we consoled by the persuasion, that, if Providence continue his life and health, he will still be eminently useful. The sun which has set upon our island will enlighten and bless other regions. With respect to his deluded countrymen, we doubt not but that, whenever the

the hour of reflection shall arrive, they will, as one man, be sensible of their loss, blush for their behaviour, and ardently wish the return of this voluntary and memorable exile.

To proscribe a particular class of men for their opinions, Sir, is a measure as destitute of policy as it is of justice. It is properly, indeed, persecution; and persecution is ultimately less injurious to the cause of the sufferer, than to the interests of those by whom it is employed. The effects which followed the revocation of the edict of Nantes* are well known, and furnish an admirable lesson to all governments. It is not wise to drive men of talents and virtue from a country, whatever be their sentiments. Truth, if permitted to support itself, will always have such advantage over error, that no danger can be reasonably dreaded from the most open declaration of *opinion*. *The conduct*, and the *conduct alone*, should be amenable to the laws.

It is our earnest wish, Sir, to live, if possible, in charity with all men. We only ask from our neighbours that equity and candour which

* For the nature and consequences of this event, see Voltaire's History of the Age of Louis the Fourteenth, Chap. xxxii.

it is not less our inclination than our duty to exercise in return. Charge us not with disaffection, until ample proof has been afforded of such disaffection. Say not, that our religious sentiments are hostile to excellence of character and peace of mind, before you have produced sufficient reasons for the assertion. Such is the condition of man, such the nature of the world, that no principles have their full efficacy upon the feelings and the conduct. Men likewise are generally disposed to esteem those views of religion which themselves entertain, as peculiarly favourable to virtue and happiness: and the tendency of such as are indulged by others, they too frequently regard in quite an opposite light. Nor are their ideas respecting moral worth, precisely and universally the same. The question will ever be determined by association and habit, and is addressed to the passions rather than the understandings of mankind. You will allow me, however, to observe, that the inferiority of Unitarian Christians to their brethren, as to real goodness and mental satisfaction, is not and cannot be established by facts. There are not wanting many amongst them,
 who

who demonstrate, that their distinguishing tenets are in the highest degree practical, animating and consolatory.

In conclusion, Sir, permit me once more to ask you, why you prohibited us from meeting agreeably to our original intention? Hitherto, you have assigned no reason for your conduct; you have not openly imputed to us even a mistake. The motives which influenced you can only be conjectured. It is thought by some, that you procured our exclusion from ——— meeting-house, merely through timidity and a dishonest shame. You were afraid, they imagine, to countenance, even by implication, so unpopular a description of men as Unitarians. But a man, a Christian, ought not surely to be governed by timidity. This quality, Sir, “would have prevented the dawning of light at the Reformation, and tends to retard its progress toward perfect day*.” Truth expects from us a different temper; and we must be prepared not only to act but to suffer in her cause.

* See an excellent sermon preached before an assembly of Protestant dissenting ministers at Exeter, May 10, 1786, by Joseph Bretland.

I can

I can hardly persuade myself, that you really judged our meeting to be unnecessary, inexpedient or dangerous. Neither will I take upon me to determine, whether, by the measure in question, you courted the favour of the powerful and the great. In the present day, strong are the temptations to temporize, and numerous those who almost insensibly yield to the solicitation. But I would earnestly hope, I am desirous of believing, that this, Sir, is not your case. For no man consults a dignity of character when he meanly subserves the views of others, in contradiction to his better judgment.

If *the majority of the trustees* for —— meeting-house designed by their late proceedings to injure our cause, let them know, Sir, that they have completely defeated their intentions. Their treatment of us has attracted a great degree of attention to our measures; in consequence of which, I may venture to foretell, that the grand purpose of our society will be considerably advanced.

It is our consolation and our joy, indeed, that if, agreeably to our persuasion, the doctrines of Unitarian Christians be the doctrines

of scripture, they will eventually prevail over all opposition. Whatever be the conduct or the fate of particular men, whatever the result of particular measures, *Truth* will triumph. Notwithstanding that the number of those who come forward in the public avowal of our principles be not large, yet these principles are secretly maintained by many who would have no hesitation in professing them, were it not for considerations of present interest and comfort. The seed which is sown cannot be lost: it has already taken root and springs; though perhaps it may be reserved for our distant posterity to reap the harvest.—I remain,

SIR,

Your humble servant,

JOHN KENTISH.

—, October 1794.

POST.

P O S T S C R I P T.

PAINFUL as is the perusal of ecclesiastical history, it affords instruction. I find, that the recent conduct of the gentleman to whom the above Letter is addressed, is not without a precedent—a precedent, however, which he can hardly approve. In the year 1719 a memorable controversy took place at Exeter, respecting the Trinity. Amongst those who suffered for the denial of the doctrine were Mr. Hallett, *an ancestor of* ———, and the celebrated Mr. James Peirce. The latter has recorded a fact which bears a strong resemblance to the late proceedings of *the majority of the trustees for* ——— *meeting-house*. At the same time, his reasoning upon it seems exceedingly just, and strictly applicable to the case in question. Part of what he has said upon the subject is here transcribed, and is submitted, without a comment, to the reflections of the reader.

“ The next day, which was Friday, three of the four proprietors (*i. e.* trustees) of the

meeting-house where Mr. Hallett and I used to preach, went in their own and the fourth's name, and took up the keys of the house."—
 "Let the world now judge. *The house was built at the common charge; the gentlemen were made proprietors only for form sake, the law making it necessary the property should be vested in some persons; and the greater the confidence was that was placed in them, the more intolerable was their oppression when they betrayed their trust.* 'Tis plain the people designed the house for their own use in the worship of God, and that it should be at their disposal. This was virtually owned by them as often as they left the people to the choice of a minister. If they who were dissatisfied had withdrawn from us, and gone where they liked better; or if they had attempted to eject us by the votes of the people, we are too much friends to liberty to have troubled the world with such a public complaint; but if these proprietors may rightfully shut the doors against whom the people choose, or (which is all one) may make themselves the absolute judges whom to admit, or whom to exclude, I can't see why the people should ever more
 5 be

be concerned in any choice at all. These gentlemen have by this means the perpetual advowson of the living; and if the people will bear such an insult upon their liberty and just right, there is an end of one principle the dissenters have always pretended to hold. I think it becomes them, as ever they will shew themselves friends to liberty, to protest against such unjust and oppressive methods. I shall always suspect the cause which the zealots can find in their hearts to support by such injustice*.”

* Case of the Ministers ejected at Exon. By James Peirce, one of them. London, 1719. p. 14. 17.

(58)
be concerned in any choice at all. These
particulars have by this means the perpetual
advocation of the living; and if the people
will bear such an insult upon their liberty and
just rights, there is an end of our principle the
different have always pretended to hold.
think it becomes them as ever they will be
to promote and oppose a method. I shall

Sold by J. JOHNSON, in St. Paul's Church-yard,

I. The MORAL TENDENCY of the GE-
NUINE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE; a Dis-
course written with reference to Mr. A. Fuller's
Examination of the Calvinistic and Socinian Sys-
tems. Second Edition.

II. STRICTURES upon the REPLY of Mr.
FULLER to Mr. KENTISH's DISCOURSE.

Kentish, John,

A Vindication Of The Principles Upon Which Several Unitarian Christians
have formed themselves into societies,

London 1800

Polem. 1452 cm#Beibd.1

urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10774496-3